

ACTION

~~SECRET~~

Friday, February 21, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Letter to General Gowon, Head of The Federal Government of Nigeria

At Tab A, for your signature, is a reply to General Gowon which conveys your policy approach to the Nigerian civil war. Gowon's inaugural greeting (Tab B) invited you to send a personal emissary on a fact-finding visit to Nigeria. Your reply has been held pending the NSC study on Nigeria-Biafra relief, and particularly the decision on a relief coordinator.

This letter will be a primary policy document in our relations with the Federal side. It should establish clearly both the tone and substance of the careful balance you wish to strike between a high public impact on relief and minimal political involvement. Moreover, all or part of the letter may leak in Lagos. The position it takes should be credible to our own public as well as to Gowon.

Reflecting your NSC decision, the letter tells Gowon:

-- Our interest is principally humanitarian, and we need his cooperation to do all we can for the suffering on both sides.

-- We are going to appoint a Relief Coordinator to emphasize our strictly humanitarian concern with the civil war. The Coordinator should talk both to Gowon and the Biafrans in an effort to facilitate relief.

-- The U.S. will avoid political involvement as much as possible. We are not shifting to support of Biafra, and we shall quietly regard a Federal reunification of Nigeria as in our best interests.

It is important that Gowon and his colleagues have authoritative word from you on these central points -- and in a warm yet frank and business-like manner. We should play it reasonably straight with the Federals if we are to have a chance to accomplish something tangible in relief. And doing something tangible -- whatever the magnitude -- will be the key to looking credible to public and Congressional critics here at home.

~~SECRET~~

DECLASSIFIED
PA/HO Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
April 21, 2005

REPRODUCED FROM ORIGINAL IN COLLECTIONS OF THE MANUSCRIPT DIVISION

~~SECRET~~

- 2 -

You should decide on this letter before we announce the relief coordinator, and preferably before you leave for Europe. Prior notification to Gowon of the coordinator's appointment will definitely smooth the way for our relief diplomacy over the coming weeks and months. However, in the tense state of affairs in Nigeria right now, announcement of the coordinator without prior notice will only invite misunderstanding and probably official rancor.

Elliot Richardson and I have been over this letter in detail for matters of precision. It is somewhat long and repetitive. We have had to recommend its length, however, as the price of conveying most clearly the atmosphere as well as the substance of your policy toward the Federal side and relief matters in general.

RECOMMENDATION:

That you sign the letter at Tab A.

HAK:RMorris:lw
2/21/69

~~SECRET~~

DECLASSIFIED
PA/HO Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
April 21, 2005

Tab A

Feb 22, 1969

Dear General Gowon:

I much appreciated your thoughtful letter on the occasion of my inauguration. I share your desire to continue the warm friendship and mutual understanding our two countries have always enjoyed.

The civil war dividing Nigeria is indeed of deep concern to me and my countrymen. We feel your tragedy because we are your good friends, and because we know so well Nigeria's great potential for peaceful and prosperous development. Since your independence, Americans have worked side by side with Nigerians to help make that high promise come true. I know you understand that it is precisely these close ties that are at the heart of our national anguish over the suffering of innocent civilians on both sides of the civil war.

I wish to be quite clear, however, that my Administration has no desire to involve the United States in the political and military issues of this conflict. Those aspects of the war are a Nigerian and African problem. In the last account, only you and your adversaries can resolve them.

Yet we both know, General, that the humanitarian concern of the United States -- unalloyed as it is for the great majority of Americans -- is inevitably complicated by political questions. Relief must operate, after all, in the midst of war. The problem you and I face together is how we can effectively cooperate to save innocent lives on both sides of the battle lines, while avoiding any suggestion of United States political interference in Nigeria's internal affairs.

I agree that it would be very useful to both of us to establish a channel on relief matters -- by which I may receive first-hand reports of the facts of the problem, and you and your Government may express your views. Thus, we plan very

DECLASSIFIED
PA/HO Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
April 21, 2005

soon to announce the appointment of a Special Consultant, whose mandate would clearly define the strictly humanitarian nature of our concern over the events in your country. There would be no question of mediation or other political intervention. We shall be in close touch with you, through our respective Ambassadors in Washington and Lagos, on further developments regarding this appointment. I should hope that this representative might have a full and frank discussion with you on how to facilitate the flow of relief to the suffering on both sides. I should hope also for your full understanding of any relief discussions this representative might have with representatives of the secessionist area.

I have written this letter -- as I think you would want me to -- in a spirit of candor and openness. And in that spirit I wish to add this final point. I know these first days of my Administration have been a period of uncertainty with regard to the position of the United States on the Nigerian civil war. I want you to know that the United States does not contemplate either support for or recognition of the secessionist authorities. We shall hope for the earliest possible end to the fighting and suffering. We shall regard a peaceful and just reconciliation of Nigeria as in the best interests of Africa and all those, like the United States, who wish her well.

I hope you will feel free to write me again whenever it seems useful. We lead our peoples at a time when their traditional friendship is sternly tested. If we can work together, however, I am confident we can meet that test.

Sincerely.

15/

His Excellency
Major-General Yakubu Gowon,
Head of the Federal Military Government
of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,
Lagos.

RN:RMorris:lw
2/21/69